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WASHINGTON TALK

Briefing

The Subject Is Arms

Three influential Senators, two Republicans and a Democrat, will meet today with a former chief arms negotiator to discuss Congressional responses in the event President Reagan decides to breach a limit on missile launchers that was established in the second strategic arms limitation agreement.

At issue is whether the President will decide to "break out" of the non-binding limit of 1,200 launchers capable of handling multiple independently-targetable re-entry vehicles by going ahead with May 20 sea trials of the MIRV-equipped Nevada without decommissioning other missile launchers to stay below the limit.

Taking part in the meeting will be Senator John H. Chafee of Rhode Island, a former Secretary of the Navy who is the third-ranking Republican in the Senate and chairman of the Republican Conference; Senator John Heinz of Pennsylvania, chairman of the National Republican Senatorial Campaign Committee, and Senator Patrick J. Leahy, Democrat of Vermont, deputy chairman of the Senate intelligence committee. Meeting with them will be Gerard C. Smith, director of the Arms Control and Disarmament Agency when the first strategic arms pact was negotiated.

Although the launcher limit amounts to a kind of gentleman's agreement because the second arms pact was never approved by the Senate, breaching it could have serious implications for the future of arms control, the Senators say.

They agree Congress will have little recourse other than budgetary strictures if the President decides to exceed the launcher limit, but they will urge him to find other ways to carry out the sea trials. They oppose a suggestion by the Pentagon to dry dock for repairs submarines equipped with the older Poseidon missile launchers, a move that would give the United States six months to actually remove and decommission the launchers aboard them. The Senators say that is hedging at best.

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